Dairy Herd Management
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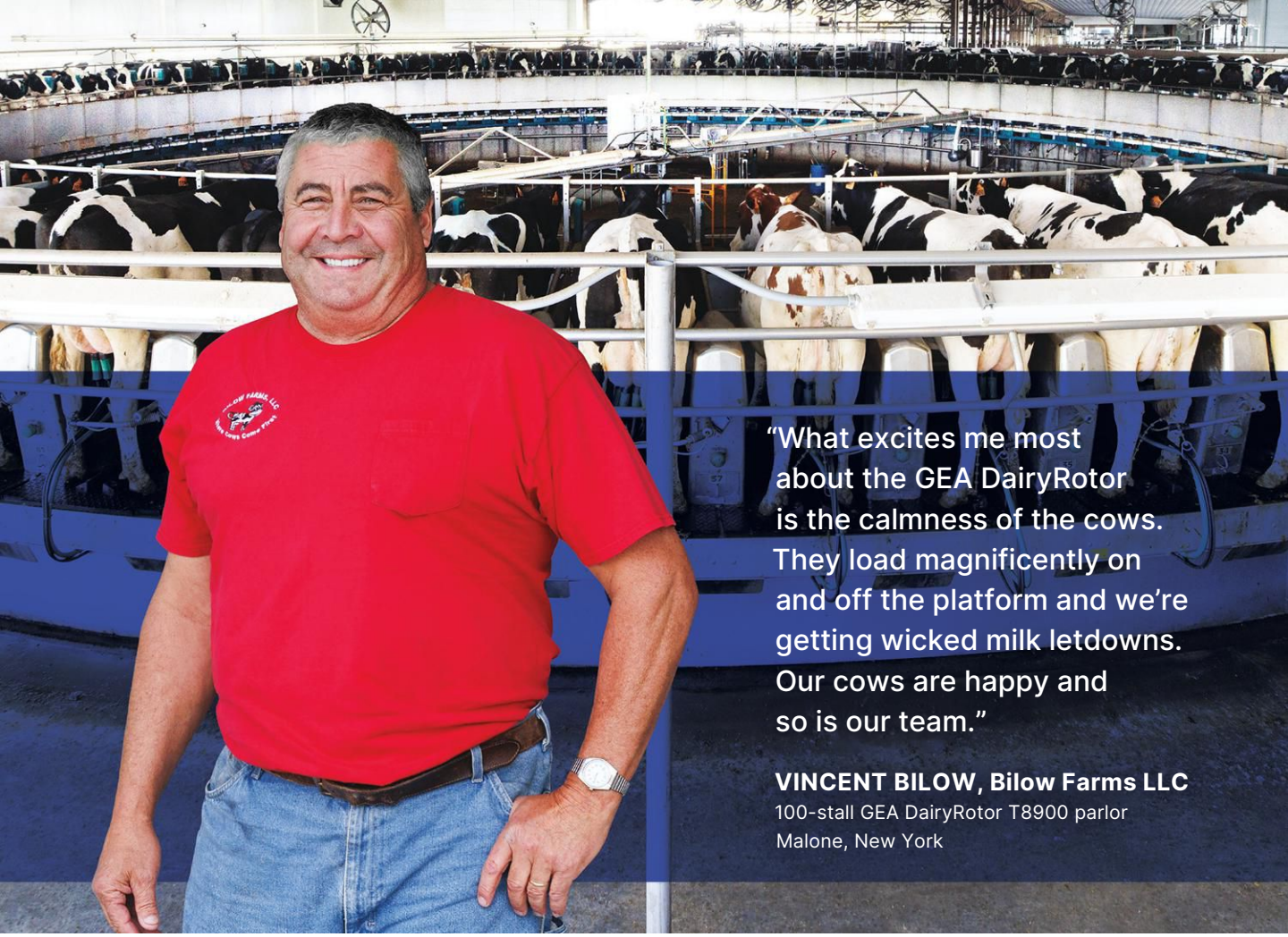
FARM JOURNAL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Find Meaning in Passionate Work

When someone passes away, it naturally serves as a reminder that tomorrow is not guaranteed and nobody knows when the good Lord will call us home. In August, one of my colleagues, Greg Henderson, who was the editorial director for Drovers, our beef brand, unexpectedly passed away. My heart sank upon hearing the news, and I was struck by a profound sense of loss.

Greg was on the verge of retirement, and it broke my heart to think he didn't get to enjoy those years of relaxation. The painful memories from 2008 when my father suffered a massive stroke and spent nearly five weeks in the ICU and the sorrow I felt when my father passed away in 2016 came flooding back.

Greg Henderson
1957 – 2024

LESSONS LEARNED

Years before my father's stroke, I remember having a conversation with him about not taking time off. He was incredibly proud of the fact he milked cows every day, twice a day for decades.

"I'm sure I hold some kind of record," he once told me with a sense of pride.

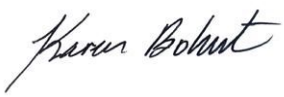
As my dad lay in the ICU after his stroke, I recalled that "record" and felt an overwhelming urge to shake him and tell him, "Nobody cares about your record." But, through tears and with time, I came to understand the record meant a lot to him.

My father grew up incredibly poor, beyond my comprehension, and was determined to build a better life for his own family. He was devoted to providing the financial and emotional support his own family had failed to provide for him. As a result, dad poured himself into his work as a dairy farmer, and he was so proud of the farm and family he built.

THE HEART OF A RANCHER

Greg's journey in the beef industry was more than just a career; it was his life's purpose. Much like my late father, who loved his work, Greg was deeply committed to the ranchers he served. He always had their back. His connection to the beef audience wasn't just professional; it was personal. Greg understood the challenges, joys, and intricacies of ranch life because he was one of them. This allowed him to create content that was not only informative but also resonated with the heart and soul of the ranching community.

As I reflect on Greg's life and work, I am reminded of my late father and the common thread that binds passionate individuals like them. They both missed out on what many might call the "easy years," but they gained something much more valuable in return — the joy and fulfillment of doing work they loved.



Karen Bohnert
Dairy Editorial Director

Dairy Herd Management
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PHOTO: DAIRY FARMERS OF WISCONSIN

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Technology as a Change Agent

Strategic investments can transform productivity and animal management

In today's rapidly evolving dairy landscape, the mantra "work smarter, not harder" is more relevant than ever. The integration of cutting-edge technology on the farm is not just a trend but a necessity for enhancing productivity as well as animal welfare and management. However, it's crucial for producers to pause, take a step back and strategically evaluate the technologies that best fit their unique needs before making a purchase.

FIND THE RIGHT FIT

Purchasing tech can come with excitement and anticipation to help create an "easy" button for the dairy, says Steven Pavelski, large herd application expert for Nedap. However, he notes it's important to temper expectations and enlist a team from the dairy, along with external advisers, to create an implementation plan that includes regular checkpoints to hold stakeholders accountable.

"Many times, if a new tech fails on a farm, it's because the chain of people involved to install and implement it fell apart at some point, and nobody diagnosed that break in the chain to rectify," he says.

> "Many times if a new tech fails on a farm, it is because the chain of people involved to install and implement it fell apart at some point." —*Steven Pavelski, Nedap*

It's also imperative farms document the goals they hope to achieve through tech implementation, and then address each goal in your team checkpoints to work toward achieving them, he adds.

For example, if a farm wants to move away from using tail paint after installing activity monitors, Pavelski says there should be a checkpoint after all of the cows are onboarded and the data is flowing smoothly to talk through daily protocols and how those should start to shift.

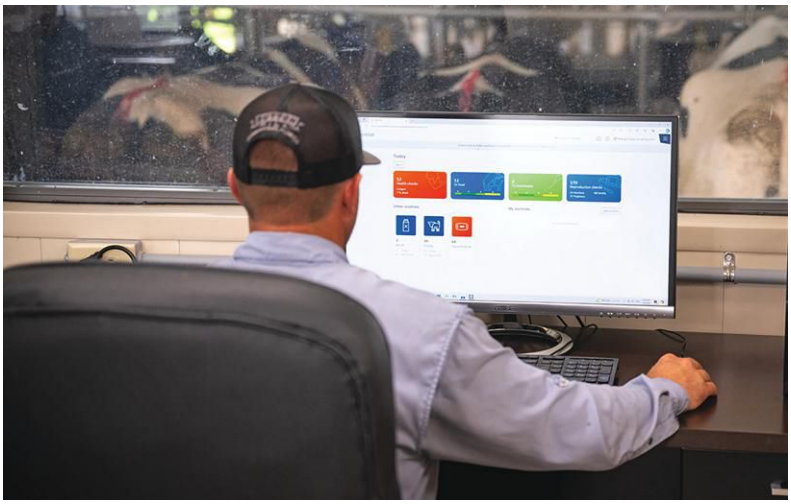
"At some point, once the team verifies, they trust the system, they need to decide to drop tail painting and then follow the numbers to verify they are still achieving their insemination and preg rate standards," he says. "This may sound simple, but without the constant follow-up, the workers may go on painting tails for eternity. It is also important to have the follow-up checkpoint to monitor the numbers, verifying that performance is maintaining or increasing, because if it's not, then there may be a need for increased training or dialing in the system in order to reach those goals."

TAKE THE LEAP

In the quest for improved breeding efficiency and healthier herds, Van Beek Dairy took a significant step by integrating technology into their operation. Milking around 1,100 cows, this Monroe, Ore., dairy farm installed the GEA CowScout monitoring system, a decision made years after constructing their 50-cow stall rotary in the early 2000s and incorporating milk meters with a robotic cow prepping arm.

Fred and Martin Van Beek, owners of Van Beek Dairy, had been considering monitoring systems for a while but hesitated due to uncertainties about the cost-benefit analysis. >

An isolated approach to assessing and purchasing a single piece of technology will provide a narrow scope for future investments.



PHOTOS: NEDAP, VAN BEEK DAIRY

In a matter of weeks, Nick and Rachel Van Beek and the farm's other employees have learned to adapt to working with the new monitoring system, which has allowed the farm to reduce the number of shots given to cows.

"I just didn't think I could get them penciled out," Fred admits.

While he wasn't completely sure the calculations would justify the expense, he realized something needed to change to improve his herd's conception rate.

On herd check days, Van Beek noted a concerning pattern: half of his cows were not pregnant. Transitioning to OvSynch timed breeding seemed like a solution, but it led to a dependency on scheduled breeding rather than heat detection.

"The guys would not lose their ability to heat detect," Van Beek explains. "Instead, they would start relying on the timed breeding unless the cow is obviously in heat."

A visit to another dairy farm using CowScout and discussions with his team, coupled with a promotional offer from GEA, convinced Van Beek to take the leap of faith and integrate the CowScout monitoring system.

"It became a no brainer," he says.

MEASURE INVESTMENT IMPACT

Today, Van Beek Dairy is reaping the rewards of this technological investment. Van Beek is pleased with the system's ability to identify and manage cows in heat efficiently, leading to quicker breeding.

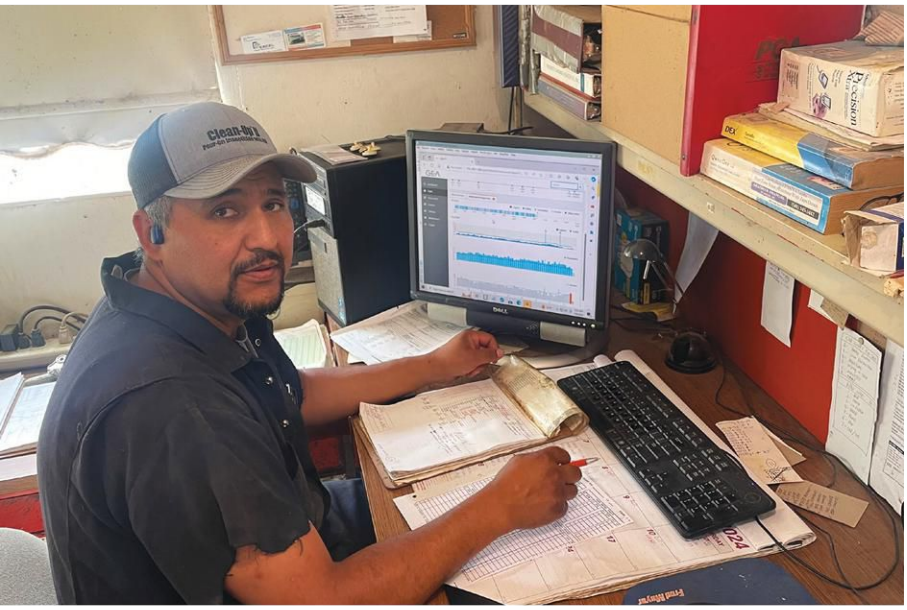
"My preg rate went up, which was what I was hoping for," he says. Despite still relying on a synchronized shot program for cows not detectably in heat, the number of shots has decreased by 50% or more, reducing costs and improving pregnancy rates. Van Beek shares his 21-day preg rate now averages 35%, up from 25% before installing CowScout.

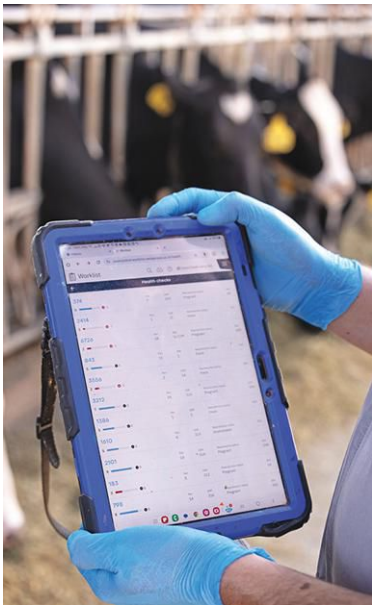
"It really is too soon to know where my preg rate will fall because I feel it takes a full year to truly evaluate," he says. "Although I know it will continue to be higher with the new monitoring system."

The ability to spread costs over time without an initial down payment made the investment more manageable for Van Beek during a period of low milk prices. The immediate positive changes to his breeding practices confirmed this decision was the right one for his dairy.

"Out of the gate, I was saving money on fewer shots, and my herd conception rate increased," he says.

Van Beek is still navigating the learning curve associated with the CowScout monitoring system's





Van Beek Dairy's 21-day preg rate now averages 35%, up from 25% before installing the CowScout monitoring system.

health benefits. Early detection of health issues before visible signs appear has proven beneficial, although diagnosing the precise problems remains a challenge.

"Now you start seeing health alerts before the cow shows signs of being sick and before she drops in milk," he notes, sharing most issues identified to this point have been stomach related.

Even though the initial calculations didn't purely justify the investment by shot reduction alone, the overall savings and improved conception rates validate the decision. As Van Beek continues to refine their use of CowScout, the long-term benefits for herd health and productivity will undoubtedly shape a more efficient and profitable future for the farm.

CELEBRATE THE MILESTONES

Before making a purchase, Pavelski strongly recommends producers do their own research and talk to other farmers. It's also important to enlist the help of trusted advisers, particularly when it comes to the new data and insights and how that information can elevate management. When the learning curve looks steep, break it down into small steps and assign team members to own each step.

"Celebrate the milestones within the process to increase engagement among all stakeholders, and always have a spot on management meeting agendas to talk about progress and next steps with the new tech. Keep the supplying company and tech support teams close and hold them accountable if the results do not achieve the expectations you outlined before purchase," he says.

When is the right time to make a tech investment?

"It all starts with what problem do you want to solve or get help on, and for me that was to reduce the number of shots I was giving and increase my pregnancy rate. I'm glad I kept reading articles and thinking about incorporating a new monitoring system so when the right deal came along, I took the leap of faith and implemented it," Van Beek says.

Integrating technology on your farm involves careful research, strategic planning and timely decisions. By breaking down the learning process, celebrating achievements and ensuring accountability, producers can effectively incorporate new technologies to enhance their management strategies and achieve the goals of the investment.

By Karen Bohnert

PURCHASE WITH PURPOSE

Scan the QR code to read more content aligned with planning and purchase decision-making that can help you maximize efficiencies and yields, improve ROI and address resource needs for the year ahead.

PHOTOS: VAN BEEK DAIRY, NEDAP

Harnessing Technology to Elevate How We Care for Youngstock

Innovation leads to improved efficiencies

In an industry where external factors such as Mother Nature, milk markets and regulations dominate, farmers have found solace in the few controllable elements of their operations. James Vander Waal, an Iowa dairy producer in Hull, is a prime example of how technology can be leveraged to enhance efficiency.

Vander Waal manages a dairy operation, milking just shy of 1,600 cows located one hour outside of Sioux Falls. Despite not considering himself a tech enthusiast, he humorously admits, "I guess I kind of am."

TRANSFORMATION

About seven years ago, Vander Waal initiated a technological transformation on his farm by installing SenseHub Dairy collars (previously known as SCR Dairy) to track his cows' heats.

Earlier this spring, Vander Waal took another leap forward by installing SenseHub Dairy Youngstock after his calf feeder quit. Initially, he undertook calf care himself and recalls urging his calf feeder to catch sick calves more quickly.

"Then, I tried doing it, and it's not easy going through 350-plus calves and assessing each of them in a timely manner," Vander Waal shares. While he is still learning about the system and its benefits, overall he is happy with the purchase.

GAINED BENEFITS

Each calf on Vander Waal's farm, including their beef-on-dairy calves that are retained until they reach 500 lb., is tagged with this monitoring system at birth. The system went live in April, and Vander Waal's oldest calves were moved to group housing a month ago. The youngstock technology has provided numerous benefits,

James Vander Waal began using the SenseHub Dairy Youngstock system this year and can now give employees a standardized treatment plan.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JAMES VANDER WAAL AND MERCK ANIMAL HEALTH

most notably saved labor and the ability to detect signs of illnesses, such as pneumonia, earlier.

"The tags are able to catch calves about two days earlier than I would through visual observation," Vander Waal notes. He also points to two other advantages of the system:

> **Gained Efficiency:** Calves not on the watch list don't need as much attention, making the assessment process quicker.

> **Gained Time:** The technology allows for focused attention on calves that need it most, freeing up time for other tasks.

Every morning after feeding the calves, Vander Waal prints a health report and systematically walks the pens, starting with the youngest calves. This process ensures only the calves needing attention are closely monitored.

Today, Vander Waal uses technology to streamline his labor needs. By leveraging the SenseHub Dairy Youngstock system, he can assign less experienced employees to treat the calves, armed with a standardized treatment plan.

SOLID CALF CARE

Whether or not Vander Waal considers himself a tech enthusiast, his commitment to technology-driven efficiency is undeniable.

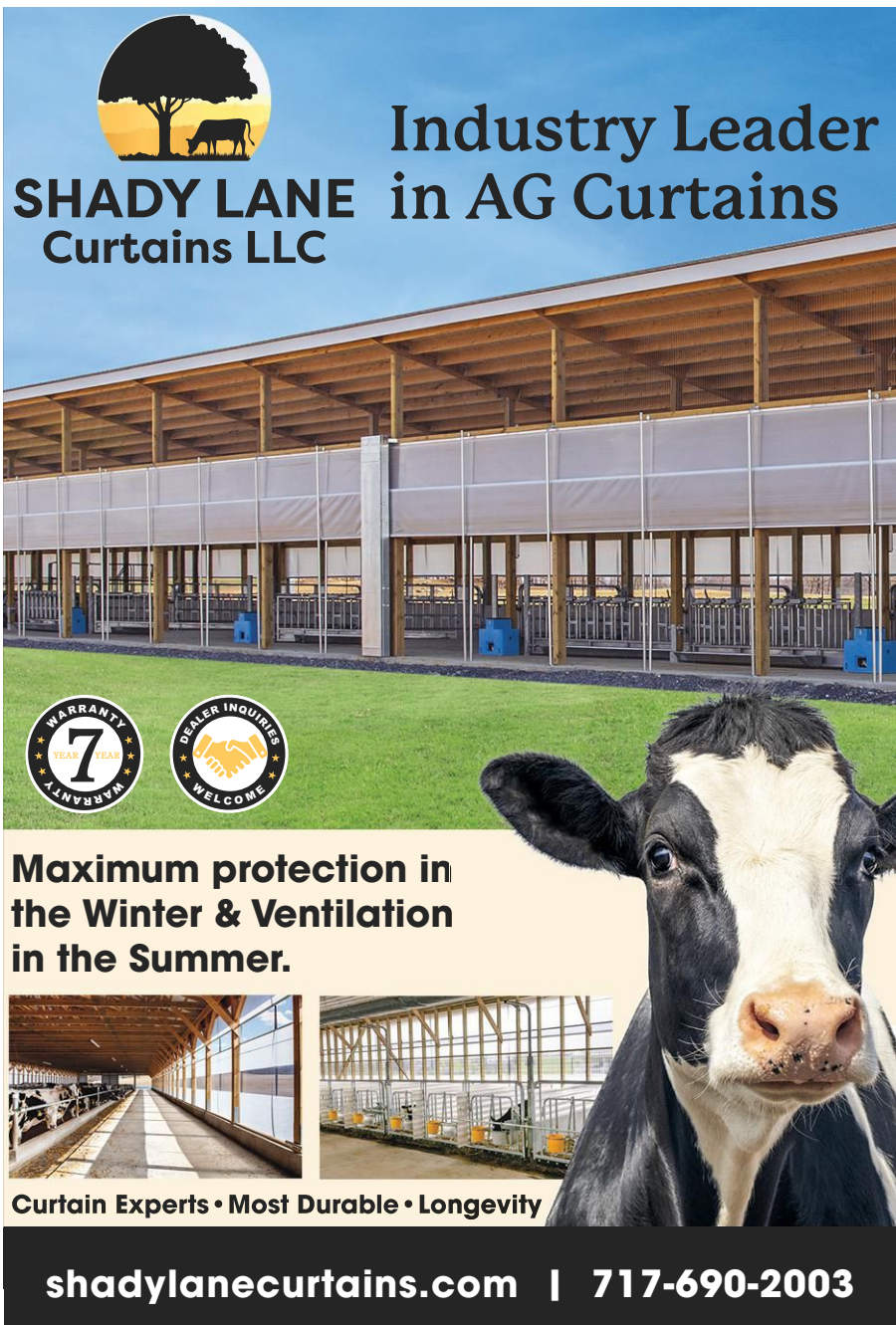
"Calves are worth more today than they have been in a long time, so calf care is extremely important," Vander Waal emphasizes. "Those black calves are worth $500-plus at day one, and dairy calves are also worth a lot more than they once were. It is important to ensure all the calves stay healthy."

Brandt Kreuscher, dairy business development manager for North America with Merck Animal Health, says SenseHub Dairy Youngstock is the first technology of its kind that can monitor calves from birth onward. This application is designed specifically for individually housed and group housed calves that are suckling. The tag uses different software applications based on the animal's age and location.

"If we think about the task of raising calves, it is an amazing skill set," Kreuscher says. He adds the SenseHub Dairy Youngstock tags highlight calves that need attention with an LED light, assisting employees in quickly scanning and detecting calves that might be sick and need extra attention.

While at times a lot can seem out of control for a producer, technology provides a sense of control, allowing gained efficiencies and improved health outcomes.

By Karen Bohnert



Health Traits Have Genetic Heritability in Calves

Growing evidence in inherited disease resistance

In the quest to raise healthy, productive, profitable calves comes an emerging element: genetics.

Along with the myriad factors dairy producers embrace to raise the healthiest potential offspring, there is growing evidence that calves can inherit disease resistance from their parents. Thus, traits for resistance to diseases like pneumonia and scours can become an increasingly important factor in dairy genetic selection, according to Isaac Haagen, assistant professor of animal science at the University of Minnesota.

Haagen shared his thoughts on dairy calf genetic health traits on a recent episode of "The Dairy Podcast Show." He discussed data that he gathered during his graduate studies at Pennsylvania State University, which encompassed 15 organic dairy herds from across the U.S., ranging in size from about 30 cows to several thousand.

Specifically, he merged the calf health data from those herds, which was gathered via a variety of herd software platforms. Then, using traditional pedigree analysis and a limited amount of genomic data, he was able to determine that, based on that data set, health traits in calves are heritable to a degree similar to more widely monitored traits like Daughter Pregnancy Rate (DPR) and Productive Life, generally about 5% to 10%.

Haagen says that rate is similar to the heritability reported by Zoetis for the Calf Wellness Index™ (CW$™) in their Clarifide Plus genomic test. The Clarifide Calf Wellness Index encompasses traits for respiratory disease, scours and calf livability.

IMPACT ON THE BOTTOM END

A Canadian study recently published in the Journal of Dairy Science further supports the notion that calf diseases can be controlled in part via genetic selection. In that study, records from more than 62,000 dairy calves from 1,617 Canadian herds spanning 2006 to 2021 were evaluated.

The Canadian researchers found that heritability for respiratory disease and diarrhea ranged from 2% to 7%. They also discovered that calves born to the bottom 10% of sires for the traits were 1.8 times more likely

PHOTOS: WYATT BECHTEL, ISTOCK

to develop respiratory disease, and 1.9 times more likely to develop diarrhea, compared to daughters born to the top 10% of sires.

That group advocates for a national recording system to allow for national genetic evaluation, a concept Haagen also supports in the U.S.. He says the evidence is strong enough to make the argument for a calf health specific index among the national traits evaluated by the Council for Dairy Cattle Breeding.

"While 5% to 10% heritability is a relatively small number, we know from other health traits that even that small number can have an impact over many generations," Haagen states.

He adds that with any selection index, "we're really selecting for profitability. With heifer replacement costs generally running as the second or third highest expense on farms, there is value in selecting for healthier animals that are expected to live longer."

> "We have found that calves differ in their ability to acquire passive immunity."
> *—Isaac Haagen, University of Minnesota*

An interesting and related factor in Haagen's research was an analysis he ran on serum total protein (STP) as a health measure. His findings indicated, in addition to crucial factors such as colostrum delivery, STP also is a heritable trait in calves.

"We found that calves differ in their ability to acquire passive immunity," he explains. When Haagen and his colleagues separated animals according to breeding value for STP, they found that 4% to 6% more of the heifer calves in the top quartile would remain in the herd at one year of age compared to the worst calves.

Haagen is continuing his research on calf health genetic traits using 20 years' worth of data on more than 6,000 calves from commercial dairy herds across Minnesota. He hopes the longer range of that data will help him extrapolate lifetime performance evidence related to genetic factors for calves, providing yet more proof of the link between the two.

By Maureen Hanson

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For the Love of Farming and FOOTBALL

Building bridges with the UW Badgers

There's a special energy the fall season brings to both farming and football. You can feel a buzz in the air that fills both the fields and the stands as farmers and players alike dig deep to push through a season driven by long hours, hard work, determination and commitment.

While it might seem like football players and dairy farmers come from different worlds, they share more similarities than what meets the eye. Just ask the crew at Virhada Holsteins LLC, in Mount Horeb, Wis., who recently hosted part of the Wisconsin Badgers football team to their dairy operation.

THE KICKOFF MOMENT

In early March, Virgil Haag, part-owner of Virhada Holsteins, along with his wife, Dawn, attended a Top Chef watch party, hosted by Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin. During the event, the duo had the opportunity to meet Travis Beckham, a previous tight end for the New York Giants and a former University of Wisconsin-Madison football player.

"Travis mentioned that he had never visited a dairy or had even been close to a cow before," Dawn Haag says. "So, we wanted to give him an opportunity to see what dairy farming was like."

Plans were drawn up to have Beckham visit the family's 70-year-old, 240-cow robotic operation in June. During his visit, Beckham got to see the robots in action and even experienced what it was like to milk a cow with a portable milker.

"He wanted the full experience," says Karsen Bentley, the Haags' daughter, herd manager and part-owner of Virhada Holsteins. "He understood that farming isn't easy, and he really seemed to enjoy learning the ins and outs of what we do."

After a full day of farming, Beckham, who now works as a manager of business development for Badger Sports Properties at the University of Wisconsin, told Bentley and Haag, along with Virgil and Kody, Bentley's brother, that he would like some of the UW Badger football players to share in his on-farm experience.

"A lot of the football players come from different states," Haag says. "So part of Travis' goal to bring the Badgers out here was to make this an educational experience for them so they can learn a little more about the state they're playing for, and obviously dairy is a huge part of what drives Wisconsin."

GAME DAY ON THE FARM

In partnership with Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin, Beckham and his team, along with the Haag family, coordinated a special visit for members of the UW-Football team to come see their farm in July.

"I'll never forget watching that Wisconsin bus drive up the driveway," Haag recalls. "I think we all just got this sense of pride of showing off our farm. The Badgers are a really big part of Wisconsin culture, so getting to know some of the players and showing them

Virhada Holsteins LLC, in Mount Horeb, Wis., proudly opened their barns doors to host the UW Badger Football Team earlier this year.

PHOTOS: DAIRY FARMERS OF WISCONSIN

what Wisconsin's dairy farmers can do was such a neat experience."

In total, 30 football players made their way to Virhada Holsteins where they got an up-close look at the cows and calves, robotic milking systems, TMR wagons, and nearly every aspect of farm life.

"We had to remember that only one of the players had ever been on a dairy farm before," Haag says, "so we really had to go back to the basics."

One of the standout moments for Bentley, along with many of the football players, was when she brought out her 5-year-old show cow, Cheers, to greet the team.

"I've had Cheers since she was a December calf, and she's just a big puppy dog," Bentley says with a laugh. "She makes me look tiny, but when the guys stood next to her, they made her look small. It was great getting to watch them interact and take pictures with her."

SIDELINE CONVERSATIONS

Along with teaching the players about farming, the Haag family also had the chance to have conversations about the nutritional aspects of dairy products. Haag recalls talking with one of the players about the yogurt their farm helps produce.

"Our milk plant provided some yogurt for us to pass out to players while they were touring the farm," she recalls. "One of the guys saw the brand, Odyssey, and said, 'Hey! That's the yogurt we eat all the time after practice. That's good stuff!' I then told him that the milk from our cows goes into tanker trucks, which go to the plants that make the yogurt. You could just see the light bulb go off for him. He was fascinated."

While the Haag family relished the opportunity to showcase their operation, they equally enjoyed learning more about the football players themselves.

"These guys come from all over the country to play football here in Wisconsin," Bentley says. "Football is just like farming — it takes teamwork to get the job done. So, this was a great team building opportunity for the guys, and it just so happened to include cows."

By bringing the team to the farm, the Haag family was able to highlight just how much these seemingly different worlds have in common. From the shared values of hard work and dedication to the camaraderie needed to achieve a common goal, both farmers are football players are driven by passion. They are united by their shared commitment to a purpose greater than themselves, whether it's winning a game or feeding a community.

By Taylor Leach

Beef-on-Dairy: Semen Selection Strategies

Making the right mating decision matters

Today's dairy farmers aren't just bringing milk, cheese and butter to the table — they're also bringing beef, and it's adding some serious value to their operations.

With week-old, beef-on-dairy calves fetching nearly $1,000 in some parts of the country, prices are turning heads and calves are turning profits, pushing producers to prioritize their beef-on-dairy mating selections. And with crossbred calf prices through the roof, making the right beef semen selection has the potential to push those sky-high prices even higher.

Robert Weber, professor and department head for the Eastern Kansas Research and Extension Center at Kansas State University, highlights three considerations every dairy farmer should keep in mind before selecting semen for their beef-on-dairy program:

1. INDUSTRY DYNAMICS

As market conditions and consumer demands evolve, producers should align their beef-on-dairy mating programs with current and anticipated market needs. This alignment can be achieved by partnering with genetics consultants, using specialized mating decision tools and staying informed on industry trends.

"More research has been conducted to refine beef bull trait criteria, particularly for dairy cows, and create a beef-on-dairy sire directory and customized selection index," Weber says.

He recommends working closely with your semen provider to understand what tools are available to make the most informed decisions.

2. MAP IT OUT

Just like any breeding program, your beef-on-dairy mating decisions should align with your farm's goals.

"Consider the specific breeding objectives of your operation," Weber says. "Are the primary goals centered around maximizing milk production, ensuring high fertility rates or perhaps both? Dairy semen is the preferred option if the aim is to maintain or enhance dairy-specific traits such as milk yield and production of replacement females. On the other hand, if the focus is on enhancing growth rates, feed efficiency, improving carcass quality and aligning with market demands favoring specific beef characteristics, opting for beef semen is a more viable option."

3. EVALUATE TRAITS

When making mating decisions, producers will often turn their focus toward the traits certain sires possess. However, Weber says it's imperative not to overlook the valuable contributions of the dam.

To optimize crossbred calves, producers should establish specific criteria for selecting dams before breeding. Consider factors such as the number of calvings, genetic merit, production records and genomic testing results. Sire traits to select for include frame size, muscling, ribeye area and calving ease. This approach ensures that only the most suitable dams and sires are chosen for crossbreeding.

By Taylor Leach

PHOTO: WYATT BETCHEL

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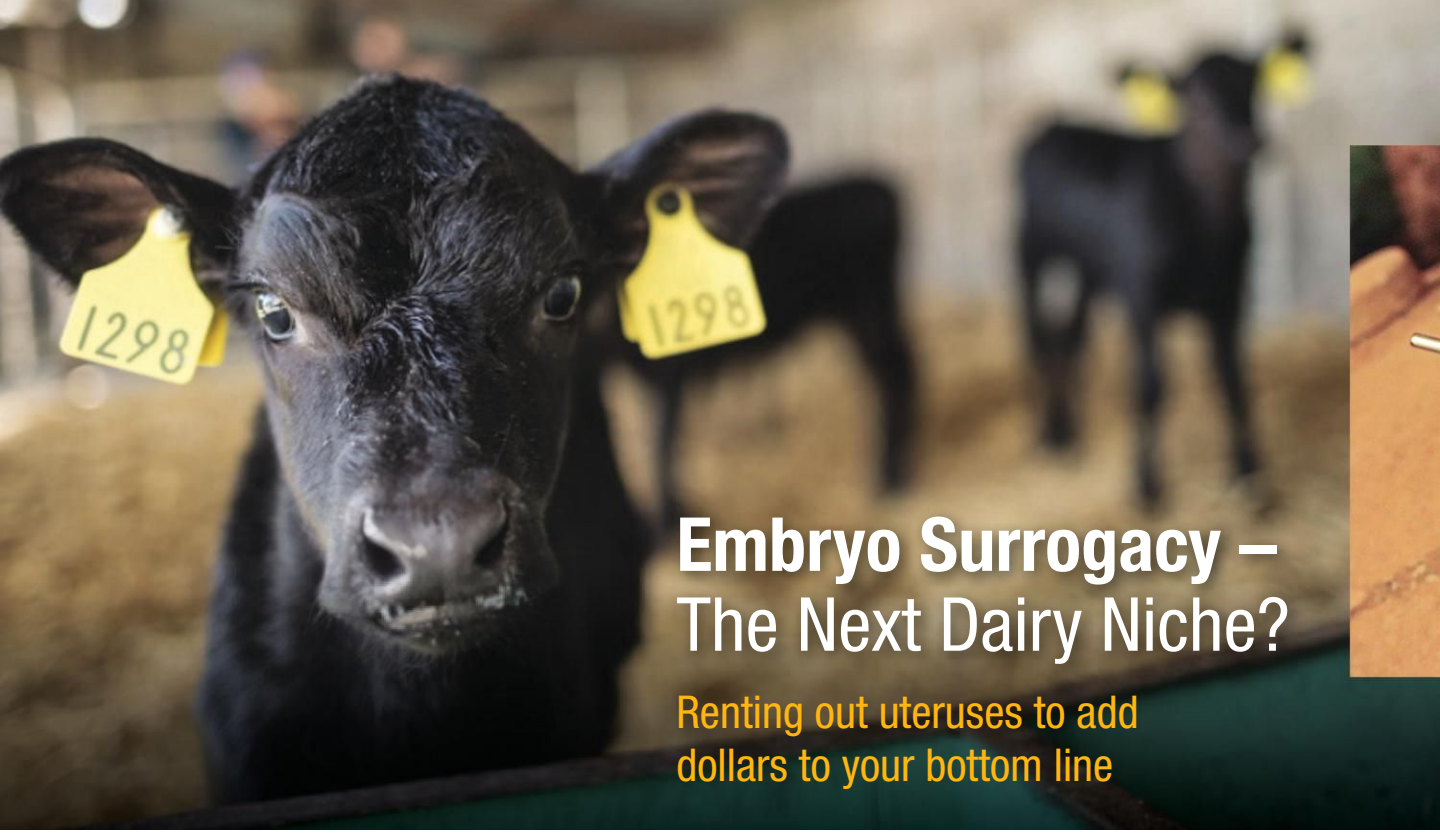


Embryo Surrogacy – The Next Dairy Niche?

Renting out uteruses to add dollars to your bottom line

From composted manure and beef-cross calves to methane-powered electricity and renewable natural gas, dairies continue to explore paths to garner bonus revenue beyond the traditional cash crop of milk.

The latest idea might be another collaboration between dairy producers and their beef cattle brethren: embryo surrogacy. Or stated another way, renting out uteruses.

"There are so many more embryos sitting in tanks than sitting in cows," declared J. Brad Hook of Humeston, Iowa, host of the "Genuine JBH" podcast. Hook lamented that in the beef cattle show stock world, breeders have made remarkable strides in genetic analysis and mating that consistently produce excellent offspring. But what has not kept up with the breakneck pace of genetic progress and embryo development is the recipients in which to put them.

Hook explains the supply of embryos has far outstripped the availability of beef recipient animals, especially in today's high-dollar-value beef industry. "Recip" cows currently are extremely expensive to purchase. Custom beef recipient herds are largely booked and have also increased their prices considerably due to the value of the animals. Today, the average take-home cost of an embryo born to a beef recipient is $4,000 to $5,000 per calf, not even counting the price of the embryos.

ENTER THE HUMBLE DAIRY COW

She has to have a calf every year anyway, and in many cases, she might not be a chosen dam to create a replacement heifer for the dairy. So why not put a beef embryo in her with a guaranteed price over market value for the calf?

That's exactly what Lynchburg, Ohio club calf breeder Jake Osborn is doing. Osborn and his son, Wyatt, are partnering with an 800-cow Ohio dairy to bring to life the overflowing supply of embryos that are sitting in their tanks and others' across the country. Last year they started with nine embryos that resulted in six live births. But next year Osborn Show Cattle plans to produce about 150 calves via surrogate dairy dams.

"The appealing part about this situation is that the dairy is able to sync up a large number of recips at the same time," Osborn notes. "You can get a whole string of calves from the same mating, born within just a few days of each other."

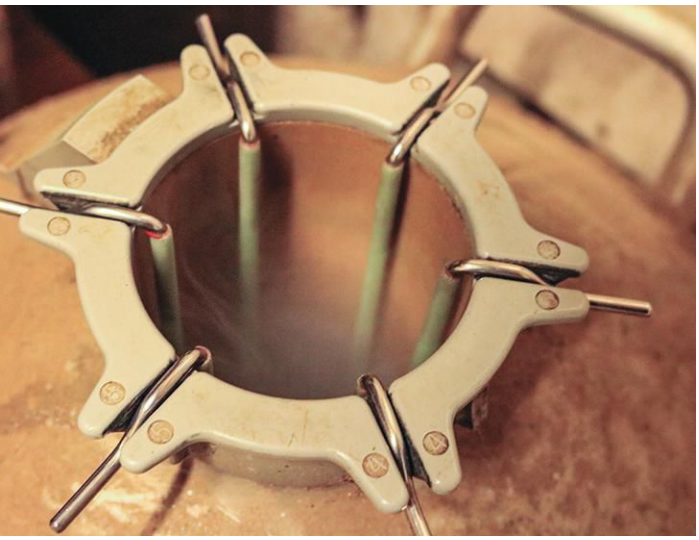
Osborn says the attention to breeding details and readiness of dairy dams also results in higher conception rates.

"At my place, a 20% to 30% conception rate on embryos was pretty common, which is not real conducive to making money," he says. "Currently, we're running 55% to 70% conception in the dairy cows, which is way better on IVF embryos than I'll ever do at my house."

AND THE CALVES THEMSELVES?

Hook says when he viewed Osborn's spring sale calf lineup this year, he couldn't tell them apart from the dam-reared calves in terms of growth and conformation. Osborn says the quality of the calves was due largely to the efforts of an excellent caretaker at the dairy.

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



Ultimately, he worked out an arrangement to pay her a bonus on the embryo calves based on their sale price.

Another benefit was the disposition of those show calves. Purchasing families were delighted to take home animals that were broke to lead.

"You can buy one for your 10-year-old and not have to worry about them getting hurt," Osborn says. "They're a lot different than a calf that has been at the side of a normal recip cow."

For the dairy, the value lies in the premium price they are paid for the calves, which Osborn says is above the healthy $800-to-900-per-head price they receive for their own beef-cross calves. The dairy owns the embryo calves until weaning at 60 to 90 days, then sells them back to the embryo contractor.

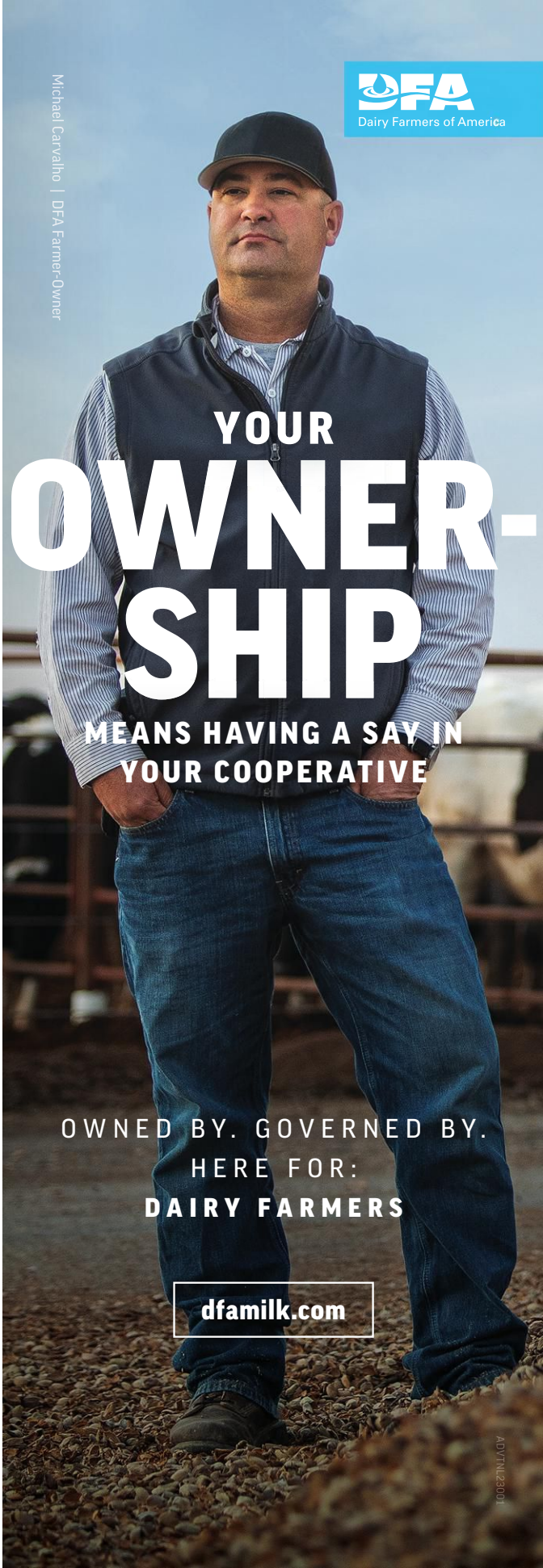
IN FURTHER COLLABORATION WITH THE DAIRY

Osborn also plans to put embryos into cows identified on the cull list. After dry-off at the dairy, they will be sold at a premium price over cull value and raise their embryo calf, plus a couple more grafted onto them.

Looking forward, Hook and Osborn say even more related business opportunities, such as custom raisers who would take embryo calves at birth and rear them into show cattle. The ability of dairy cows to calve out beef embryos could also be an avenue for purebred beef breeders to create more offspring. Plus, it could help rebuild the beef cattle herd in the U.S., which is at its smallest in more than 70 years.

"Not everyone is going to be good at this," Osborn says. "It really takes a special dairy, someone who knows a lot about nutrition and management, and really cares about calves."

By Maureen Hanson



DEREK NOLAN

The Economics of Management Practices

Most of the management practices implemented on the farm are either to manage disease or increase milk production. The market is flooded with products that can help with both goals. Understanding the economics of management practice adoption can make it easier to make adoption decisions.

DETERMINING DISEASE COSTS

Disease costs can be calculated using the simple equation: C = L+E or Costs = Losses + Expenses. Expenses are more straightforward to configure because they include the costs we typically associate with treating the disease, like drugs or added labor. However, preventative expenses are often overlooked. For example, using a pre- or postdip should be considered when evaluating mastitis expenses. Losses can be more challenging to estimate because the costs are not direct. Losses might come in the form of lost milk yield, decreased fertility or lost milk premiums.

If nothing is done to manage or prevent a disease, the total cost of the disease comes from losses alone. Once a management practice is added, the losses will decrease to a certain point, and expenses will increase. A technical optimum is reached when disease incidence drops to a point where the incidence rate can go no lower regardless of what management practice is added. In that case, expenses are the highest portion of the total disease cost. Often, the economic optimum, the point where we see no financial returns to lowering a disease incidence rate, comes well before the technical optimum.

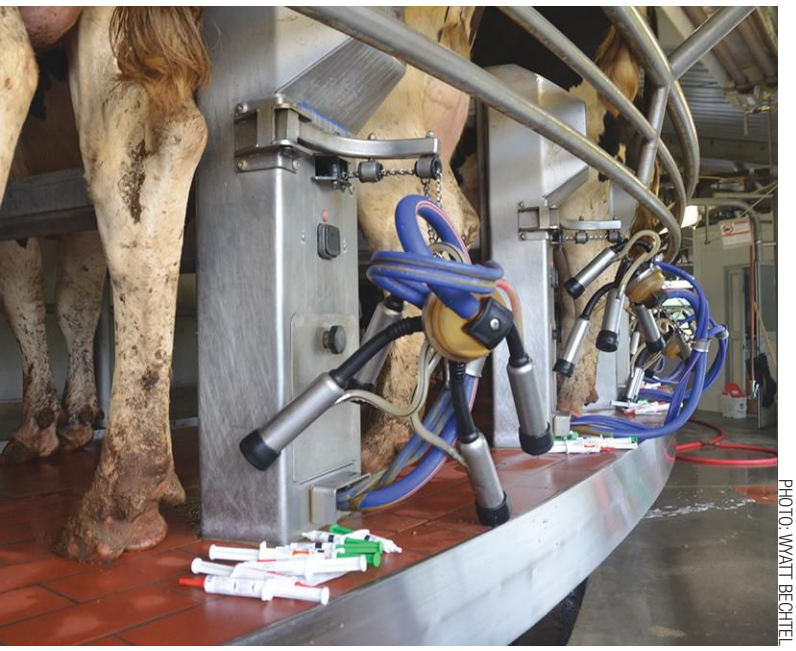


PHOTO: WYATT BECHTEL

MARGINAL LEVEL MILK

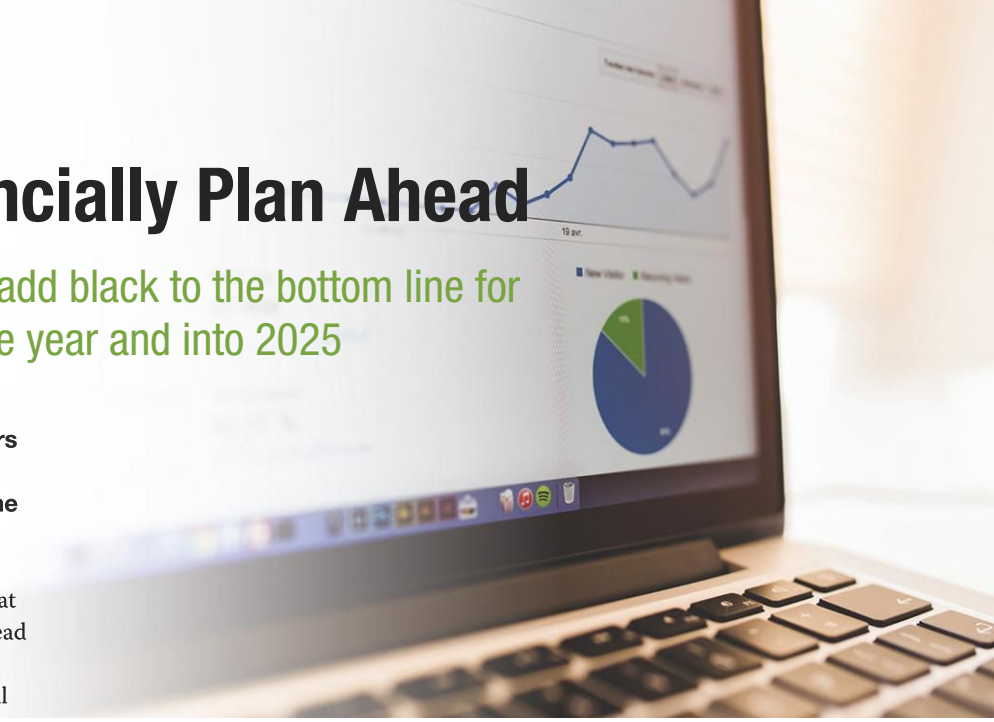
The adoption of products or changing management practices to increase milk yield should be evaluated using marginal economics. This means the cost and benefit of increasing milk per pound. Like disease management, a point will come in which the benefit of increased milk yield will not cover the costs. All costs should be considered to make the marginal level milk yield as accurate as possible. For example, feed costs typically increase as milk yield increases, so when determining the potential benefit of adding a product to the farm, feed costs and the costs of the product need to be considered.

Before adopting a product or changing a management practice, try to consider the whole picture. Determine which direct and indirect benefits or drawbacks might occur from management adoption. Overestimating costs of management practices can help ensure those hidden costs are accounted for.

Derek Nolan, Dairy Education and Extension Specialist, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Tip to Financially Plan Ahead

Essential advice to add black to the bottom line for the remainder of the year and into 2025



This time of year, farmers start spending a good chunk of their day in the seat of a tractor or combine. As the harvest season continues, "windshield time" provides a great opportunity to start thinking ahead for the next year. Producers who begin planning for 2025 early will have a competitive advantage over those who don't. Now is the time to learn the financial pulse of how your operation is performing.

Independent financial consultant, Gary Sipiorski understands it is tough to ask a farmer to stop work and turn their attention to numbers, especially this time of year. His recommendations for farmers to:

> **Set aside time.** Two hours a week to strictly focus on financial planning. "When you are fresh, in the early mornings is best and before the to-do list is delegated out," he says.

> **Focus without interruptions.** "These four hours a week may be the most profitable hours for understanding where the money is coming from and going," he notes. "You don't have to do it all in one sitting. Nights are difficult when the mind is tired. "

> **Making time to carve out conversations.** "Even if they are just being planned from a tractor seat. It will put you ahead of the curve when it comes to initiating your business plans for the upcoming year," he says.

TWO THINGS TO DO RIGHT NOW FOR SOLID PLANS IN 2025

> **Start implementing quarterly reviews.** According to Sipiorski, now is a good time to touch base with the person responsible for the financial records of your operation. "Quarterly reviews are best for Cost of Production (COP), along with Profit and Loss (P&L) projections," he says, noting that it would be nice to have had an end of the second quarter tea meeting with your lender, accountant, veterinarian, nutritionist, etc. "If not then, by the end of the third quarter. There should be some serious evaluation. I understand how busy cropping gets in October, but a November meeting should be set to talk with your accountant to help you with year-end taxes."

> **Projections need to be finalized in December.** "Balance sheets should be started in December with an accurate completion in January," Sipiorski suggests.

FOUR TIPS TO HELP MAXIMIZE A MARGIN IN 2025

> **Put extra attention to expenses.** Sipiorski suggests paying extra attention to each expense item as well as the larger expenses and discussing them with family, managers and employees to all consider if any savings can be found.

> **Analyze custom work.** Custom tillage, manure handling and harvesting should be visited with a pencil to see if owning, renting or custom work makes sense.

> **Maximize components and milk quality.** Maximizing milk components and quality should be worked on, especially with limited bases for shipping milk pounds.

> **Marketing Discussions.** Milk marketing using government-supported programs and discussions with brokers should be researched to find a margin. Remember, owners always make the final decisions.

By Karen Bohnert

PHOTO: PIXABAY

Best Milking Equipment Maintenance Tips

Can your employees actually detect these issues?

Cracked hoses, worn-out inflations, air bleeds — these are just a few of the common problems that can pop up when maintaining milking equipment. If left unchecked, they can lead to costly downtime, compromised milk quality and even animal health issues.

But the real question is: are your milkers trained to detect these issues early before they escalate? Ernest Hovingh, Extension veterinarian at Pennsylvania State University offers the following tips that should not be overlooked.

TRAIN MILKERS TO IDENTIFY THE FOLLOWING ISSUES:

> **Blocked Air Vents.** Air vents in the claw or in the inflation are intended to create a deliberate leak of air into the claw to promote milk flow away from the claw and teat and into the milk hose, according to Hovingh. Occasionally, these vents can become blocked with debris, disrupting the flow of milk and increasing the risk of environmental mastitis. Hovingh recommends training milkers to identify where these vents are located and how to make sure they are functioning properly.

"A small hiss of air can usually be heard being admitted into a functional vent, but if they are not sure if a vent is functioning properly, a small piece of a [milking] glove can be held up to the vent. If the vent is open, the glove should stick to the vent."

> **Cracked Tubes.** Another common equipment problem Hovingh often sees are cracked short air tubes. These defective tubes can interfere with the pulsation of the liner and can prevent the vacuum from working correctly.

"Milkers should be checking to see that the short air tubes are in good condition when they wash the milking clusters at the end of milking, but they should also be listening for vacuum leaks and looking for cracked tubes while milking," Hovingh says. "Proactively changing the short air tubes on a regular schedule should also be part of the parlor maintenance routine."

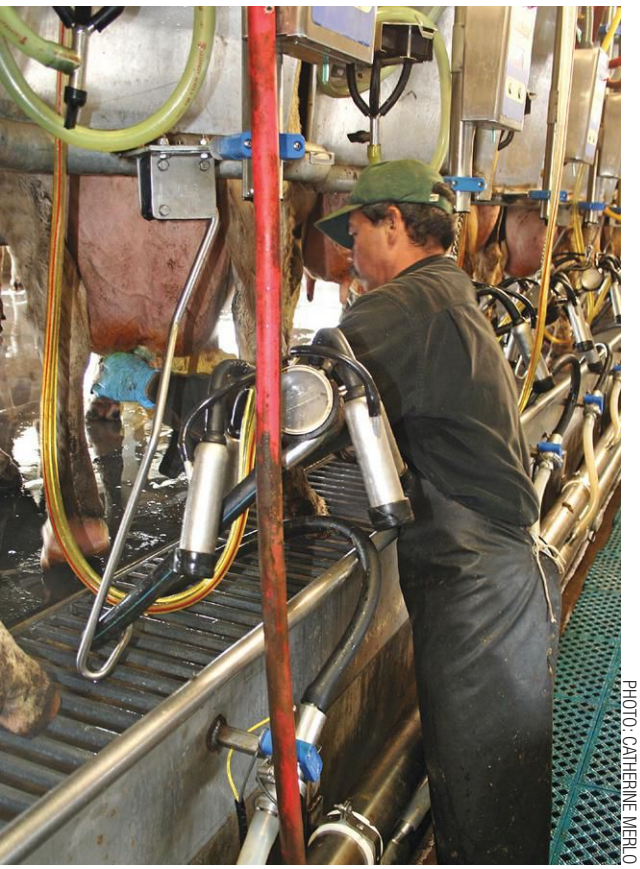


PHOTO: CATHERINE MERLO

> **Worn-out Inflations.** During scheduled maintenance days, milking equipment companies will often provide a service of placing new liners into an additional set of shells so the milkers can replace the shell and inflation as one unit. However, it's important to ensure inflations don't become worn-out or misaligned.

"Milkers should be checking to see that the alignment indicators on the inflations are lined up properly at least at the beginning of each milking," Hovingh says. "Even with shell and inflations that have alignment notches, there can be some very obvious twisting problems with these units."

> **Pinched Hoses.** Hoses that are too long or too short can often become pinched off during milking or wash cycles. This can result in reduced milk flow or unsanitized equipment.

"Milkers should be trained to watch for any restrictions/deformations in any hoses and immediately report them to the parlor manager," Hovingh adds. "Regular inspections of all hoses every two to four weeks and a regular replacement schedule are useful to prevent problems and allow for early identification."

By Taylor Leach

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Make the Most of the Gold Standard

Undoubtedly, sand is king, as it prioritizes cow comfort

Often referred to as the "gold standard" for bedding, sand has proven itself to be an ideal and profitable bedding option. Especially for the humid conditions in the Midwest through the eastern part of the country, the pros: including cow comfort, traction in the barns and milk quality, outweigh the cons: wear and tear on equipment and the process of separation from the manure stream.

Josh Waddell of Apple Shamrock Dairy puts it simply: "I can weld machinery back together. I can replace pump housings and unplug lines. But when I get a really sick cow, I can't always fix her. So we've erred on the side of we can fix the mechanical things, but if we're getting sick or down cows with the slippery floors, a lot of times we can't fix her."

APPLE SHAMROCK DAIRY

Located in Townville, Pa., Apple Shamrock Dairy is home to a milking herd of 1,100. Cows are milked 3X in a double-20 parallel parlor, and all the barns from six-month heifers through milking cows are deep bed, reclaimed sand.

Over the years, Waddell says they've tried a little bit of everything in terms of bedding.

"Compared to the initial investment in mattresses, we penciled it out that you could buy sand for several years for the cost of the mattresses. When we put the deep sand in, cow longevity just exploded — it was an exponential gain."

Waddell can confidently attribute 8 lb. per cow to the transition from mattresses topped with sand to deep sand bedding. It was proven throughout their pen-by-pen transition process: switching 400 stalls, which was half a pen or 50 cows at a time.

"Every time we got a pen done, we came up about 8 lb. of milk for that pen," Waddell says. "We always focus on high production, so when you start looking at how to maximize the facility, you only have so many stalls.

PHOTOS: WYATT BECHTEL AND JOSH WADDELL

Well — let's get as much milk out of every stall as we can, and sand really fits in for us."

Yet, like any other change, it has taken time to work out the challenges that come with sand bedding.

"There are just so many good things about sand," Waddell says. "And then it enters the manure stream. I really emphasize removing it from the manure stream."

After implementing a sand lane and dewaterer, Waddell started to see his equipment lasting longer, too. Now that they're able to remove 80% of the sand from the manure stream, some of their equipment is lasting up to six times longer.

"We used to be able to pump a million gallons through a manure spreader pump, and now we're getting six million," Waddell says. "But the bigger thing is we lightened our transports on the road, increasing productivity by about 25%, because with the sand removed, we can haul 25% more per day."

Ultimately, Waddell emphasizes three things to make sand work: get it out of the manure stream, pair your sand lane with a dewatering screen, and do it all at once.

"We did this all in very small steps," he says. "In hindsight, the cost of the dewatering screen and pulling the sand out, that was minimal, and the savings more than covered it."

> "When we put the deep sand in, cow longevity just exploded — it was an exponential gain."
> *—Josh Waddell*

ROSEDALE FARMS

Rosedale Farms spans two sites in north-central Ohio, milking approximately 1,500 milking cows, both with deep sand flush barns and parallel parlors.

With slight variations between his two sites, Paul Keener has a unique perspective on maximizing the benefits of the sand.

"The Ashland farm is a true closed-loop system with a slope screen separator, and Jeromesville is a hybrid system with the slope screen with a roll, so we're handling the dry product," he says. "It comes off the separator, dumps back into a two-million-gallon pond, and then we're filling the flush tank off of that."

Using a coarse sand, Rosedale Farms is able to reclaim an average of 95% between the two farm sites.

"I can do either one, but the coarser drains a little better than finer sand," Keener says. "I don't see it causing hoof problems on our farm, either."

Keener says the finer sand will stay suspended in the flush water through the sand lanes, carry itself into the pond, into the lagoon, whereas the coarser sand will drop out faster in the sand lanes.

Having toured dairies across the country, Keener notes the benefits of other options for less humid areas and farms with digesters, but for their location, he says sand is the best option.

"It provides forgiveness for the cows in the stall, conforms to her body, provides good traction in the alleyways, and in our area it's readily available," he says.

Drawbacks of wear and tear on equipment are minimal compared to the benefits for the cows. Any added tasks and maintenance are all in a day's work, in the interest of cow health and longevity.

"It has its problems with sand quality, you fight flush water quality, and there's definitely wintertime; sand freezes pretty hard when you're trying to get sand lanes," Keener says. "But at the end of the day, you want to do what's best for your cows. Cows are what pay the bills, so you've got to take care of them."

By Hannah Barthels

Build and Keep the Perfect Team

Takeaway leadership tips from Kwik Trip and Marucci Sports

When it comes to building and maintaining a successful team, hiring the right people is crucial. This principle is echoed by businesses leaders who shared their thoughts on the Professional Dairy Producers' (PDP) "Dairy Signal" podcast. In that episode, Ryan Levendoski, district leader at Kwik Trip, and Kyle Achord, vice president of team sales at Marucci Sports, delve into the nuances of team building and leadership cultivation.

Creating a strong, positive culture within a team is essential for long-term success. According to Levendoski, Kwik Trip looks for employees who have great people skills when it comes to hiring because everything else when it comes to the store can be taught.

"Whether it's a CDL driver or whether it's someone working in a warehouse, we want to make sure we have great people first," Levendoski says. "We want them to have great integrity, that they're willing to show up and work."

BUILD LEADERS THROUGH EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT

In any organization, recruiting the right people is more than just filling positions; it's about fostering future leaders. This sentiment is echoed by Levendoski, who emphasizes the importance of hiring individuals who can nurture effective leadership within organizations.

"It's naturally going to grow up down the line," he says. "They're going to recruit good people, and they're going to grow good leaders."

Surrounded by the athletic space, Achord offers a unique perspective on recruitment. He emphasizes that he doesn't care how good of an athlete someone was, sharing that "some might just be naturally gifted to throw a baseball."

"I'm more concerned with what kind of teammate they were and what kind of work ethic they had," he says. "How were they in their locker room? Were they a team first type of guy or were they selfish?"

Achord's insights are particularly relevant when it comes to hiring and building his sales team. He focuses on the character of potential hires, especially if a person shows a high level of integrity and trust.

OUTLINE CORE VALUES

Before you can build your perfect team, as an organization you must outline your core values and what you hope to look for when hiring. Kwik Trip outlines their six core values: honesty and integrity, respect, excellence, humility, innovation, and a strong work ethic.

Achord says that Marucci Sports' mantra has been to honor the game of baseball and softball.

"We want to grow the game," he says. "And one way to grow the game is to make sure people have a good experience with it. From the customers you interact with to the coaches and players, the athletes continue to invest back into the game to help grow. We feel like we have that chance to make a positive impact."

Being a young and small company, Marucci Sports didn't always have a clear path on how to build employees for the future.

"It was kind of an all-hands-on deck, and everybody did everything," Achord notes, explaining that the people who stayed with the company had opportunities to grow within the organization.

"We're always going to look internally first," Achord says, referring to Marucci Sports' hiring practices.

PHOTO: CATHERINE MERLO

The organization uses tools such as past references, a person's culture index and skills filled out during the job application process to ensure they are a good match.

WHAT MAKES EMPLOYEES TICK?

In today's rapidly changing work environment, understanding what drives and motivates employees is crucial for maintaining a productive and satisfied workforce. Levendoski emphasizes the importance of knowing what makes your employees tick.

"Really, what makes them show up to work," he says, highlighting the significance of understanding their interests both inside and outside the workplace.

At Kwik Trip, the culture is a fundamental aspect of their operation. Levendoski explains that the company prioritizes a strong, inclusive culture above all else. Beyond this, they have established clear guidelines and comprehensive job descriptions.

Achord says it is important to listen to your employees and understand what their goals are.

He adds that listening to your employees and understanding their goals is vital. This practice doesn't just help in aligning individual aspirations with organizational objectives; it conveys a powerful message to your team that their personal and professional growth is important.

"It makes them feel like we've taken a more vested interest in furthering them and helping develop them personally and professionally," Achord says.

By genuinely investing in your employees, you cultivate a sense of loyalty and dedication. When team members feel valued and see opportunities for personal and professional development, they are more likely to stay for years to come.

By Karen Bohnert

4
AGE IS JUST
A NUMBER.
Longevity isn't about age - it's about cows achieving their genetic potential.
The average productive life of cows in the U.S. is 2.3 lactations but research shows that cows reach their greatest production potential in the third and fourth lactation.
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PAULY PAUL

90 Days to Find a New Lender?

Dairy farmers across the U.S. are finding themselves at a financial crossroads. I don't have to read a report to tell you that. All I have to do is look at the call log on my phone.

More now than ever before, more and more dairies are reaching out because they have received 90-day notices to find new lenders. The current economic climate makes it extremely challenging to switch from one lending institution to another, especially within tight deadlines set by the banks.

Here is how I'm helping these dairies navigate through their financial challenges and what other dairy farmers can do to position their businesses for a sustainable and profitable future.

> "Ask for help and get some outside eyes to enable you to see the opportunities and your next best actions."

1. COST MANAGEMENT:

A major factor impacting dairy profitability is feed cost. Feed expenses can be dramatically reduced by optimizing the use of farm-grown forages and eliminating unnecessary feed additives. With harvest season upon us, take the time for additional planning now and save yourself money in this area for the rest of the year.

2. LABOR EFFICIENCY:

Labor costs are another significant expense. One approach to reducing labor is for the owner to be more active in doing day-to-day operations. Another is to cross-train employees so they have the skills in multiple areas and you can fill their day with tasks to maximize the value of each hour you are paying them to work.

3. SPEAK NOW:

If you haven't had a conversation with your lender yet about how your dairy farm ranks among the clients in their portfolio, have that meeting now. Find out what you must do to be at the top of their list, and then do those things.

For some dairies, this might be a time when they sit down and look at their financials and choose to exit the dairy farming business at a time when cattle are commanding top dollar. If that's the case, be sure to have a plan for the debt, not just the sale.

Most importantly, if you are in this situation right now with a 90-day notice letter on your kitchen table, don't wait. Ask for help and get some outside eyes to enable you to see the opportunities and your next best actions.

Scan the QR code to listen to Pauly Paul and Peggy Coffeen's full conversation on a recent "UpLevel Dairy" podcast.

Pauly Paul and his team at Complete Management Consulting help struggling dairies to be profitable again.

Longevity in the Cowherd

Is it beneficial to keep older animals in production?

Steve Eicker has some perspective on the dairy industry he likes to focus on during presentations to producers, veterinarians and nutritionists. It likely flies in the face of what they might hear from some other dairy industry experts today. Still, Eicker puts it out there.

"I think dairy farmers are keeping their older cows too long," says Eicker, DVM and co-founder of Valley Agricultural Software (VAS). "Guess how much milk the oldest cows are producing, the ones that should have been put on the truck a few months ago? They're lowering the herd average."

That perspective is counter to a recent development that's impacting heifer retention and potentially slowing herd turnover in the U.S. The general public and some dairy industry experts believe keeping aging cows in the milk herd, cow longevity, is beneficial. According to Eicker, that's rarely the case.

In his opinion, dairy producers who want to improve their farm's sustainability for the long term need to focus more on increasing milk production by bringing replacement heifers into the herd sooner rather than later.

"What happens when a new heifer enters the herd? You have the luxury of finding the least profitable cow, the least healthy cow, and replacing her," Eicker told a group of dairy nutritionists attending a meeting sponsored by Novus International.

His perspective is older animals need to be replaced by heifers sporting better genetics and, therefore, higher milk production along with improved salvage income potential.

LIFEBLOOD OF THE FARM

Dairy producers are replacing cows sooner today than in the past. In 2005, producers replaced about 30% of their milking herd per year. Today, Eicker says the cull rate (a term he dislikes) is about 40% annually, meaning the average longevity of milking cows in the U.S. is about two-and-a-half years.

But Eicker is concerned U.S. dairy producers won't continue replacing their cowherds at that rate.

One reason is the upfront costs for raising replacement heifers have skyrocketed. Such costs average about 20% of overall operating costs for a dairy, and are the third-largest expense after feed and labor.

The University of Minnesota FINBIN database shows the average cost to raise a heifer in 2022 was over $2,100. But the raising cost can be unintentionally misleading and is not the same as replacement cost, according to Eicker.

"The replacement cost is the difference between the raising cost and the salvage cost," he explains.

Eicker believes producers are better off financially when they retain enough heifers to replace the cows that leave the farm — if the long-term goal is to stay in business.

"I saw someone pay over $3,000 for a springer last week (in late May)," he told the group of nutritionists. "And why did they do that? Because it was worth it to them. Because guess what they didn't have? Enough heifers." >

PHOTO: TAYLOR LEACH

"The excessive beef-on-dairy thing is dangerous," says Steve Eicker, DVM. "Every time a beef calf is born instead of a replacement heifer that means a terminal cow cannot be replaced and she needs to be kept in the herd longer than desired."

MARKET COWS SOONER

Eicker contends that while disease prevention and treatment, outstanding nutrition and good animal welfare practices are good for individual cows, those practices don't support herd longevity.

"Cow longevity is not good for profitability," he says. "It's not good for the environment, and it's terrible for animal welfare."

To clarify, Eicker cares about cow welfare and cow health. His point is that older cows tend to have more mastitis and other health issues, such as lameness, all of which are bad for public perception and animal welfare. Such diseases require more of a dairy farm's financial resources, manpower and time to treat.

Furthermore, older cows don't necessarily give more milk, Eicker points out.

"It turns out replacing first-lactation animals that aren't very good animals can make a lot of money for the dairy," he says. "The people that think older cows make more milk are making a statistical analysis error when they're ignoring the animals that got 'new jobs.' It's called selection bias."

Eicker also doesn't agree with individuals and companies that are proponents of keeping an individual cow in the herd until she covers her raising costs. That could take years, if her milk production is low.

"I want to replace cows based on their milk production and profitability," he says. "We want healthy, productive cows on the farm, and, as it turns out, there's good money to be made marketing less productive cows sooner.

"We need to stop keeping cows until there's a problem," he adds. "I never want to see a blown hock. I don't want to see a down cow."

EVALUATE THE DATA

Younger dairy cows in good condition have the potential to garner top dollar at market because they typically grade well and have good carcass values. Eicker wants producers to collect and evaluate their sale data, to determine that for themselves. He encourages nutritionists and veterinarians to help in the process.

"Every time you sell a cow, get the grade, weight and total dollars," Eicker recommends. "If you realize over time, 'Oh, when I sell a second-lactation animal that's 150 days in milk, I get $2,400. And when I sell a lousy animal, I get $1,200.' Guess what you're going to want then? More replacement heifers, because you should not sell a cow without having a heifer to replace her."

At this juncture in Eicker's presentation at the Novus meeting, one of the nutritionists in the audience pipes up and says, "Not everyone is good at raising heifers."

Eicker agrees. "I think there's room for improvement for heifer growing," he says. (Another nutritionist in the crowd voices agreement.)

But Eicker stays on point.

"Why raise heifers at all? For replacements, for the future of the farm," he says. "Herd longevity is dependent on heifer replacement rate. Period."

NOT A FAN

A trend Eicker openly shares that he is not a proponent of is the recent beef-on-dairy boon. He says it's counterproductive for producers who want their dairy operations to be viable long-term.

"The excessive beef-on-dairy thing is dangerous," he says. "Every time a beef calf is born instead of a replacement heifer that means a

PHOTOS: WYATT BECHTEL, RHONDA BROOKS

terminal cow cannot be replaced and she needs to be kept in the herd longer than desired."

The flip side is beef-on-dairy can give producers more dollars sooner to meet their cash-flow needs. According to research by Dale Woerner at Texas Tech University, beef-dairy crossed calves are 30% more efficient at converting feed to beef than Holstein steers, and are on feed a fewer number of days.

(In full disclosure, Bovine Veterinarian and Dairy Herd Management, both of which are Farm Journal-owned publications, have published a number of positive articles regarding beef-on-dairy.)

Eicker's focus remains on how beef-on-dairy can result in fewer replacement heifers and, therefore, reduce long-term farm profitability. He shares some calculations.

"A Holstein heifer calf is probably worth about $400, and a beef-on-dairy calf is $600, or close to that, so the producer gets about $200 more for the latter right now," he says. "But how much would that Holstein heifer be worth in three years? More like $800," he contends. "What else can double your money like that in three years?"

VALUE OF GENOMICS

Eicker says producers who raise their own replacement heifers have more options to create a better future — a more sustainable one — for their dairy operation.

"I think you can look at different things and make better decisions," he says. "You can look at genetics, you can evaluate milk yield."

Genetic improvements are occurring at ever faster rates, thanks to the use of genomics. While the U.S. dairy herd today is just 1% larger than in 2008, it produces 19.2% more pounds of milk and 32.2% more pounds of butterfat, according to a 2024 CoBank report by Corey Geiger, CoBank lead economist for dairy production.

Even producers who don't genomic test their stock are still able to benefit from improved genetics, Eicker points out, thanks to better sires.

"That means our younger animals that come into the dairy herd are more valuable than ever," he says.

"Cows that produce more milk and meat and use less resources in the process are the path to sustainability," he adds. "That's good for the planet and good for the farmer."

By Rhonda Brooks

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Culling Ratios Reveal the **Value of Your Herd's Health**

Maximize productivity through strategic thinning of the herd

Culling is generally viewed as a negative term, but the act of culling can actually fuel a dairy herd's productivity and profitability, depending on the reason for it. Michael Lunak, Extension educator in animal systems/dairy with Penn State University, explained in a recent bulletin how involuntary culling can drag a dairy down, but voluntary culling can boost overall herd quality.

Data from multiple sources indicates the typical overall cull rate for dairies is about 37%, or a little over a third of the lactating herd per year, including cow deaths. The most recent USDA/NAHMS data set for the Northeast shows that 26.8% of those culls were voluntary — primarily due to low milk production, poor temperament or selling for dairy purposes.

The remaining 73.2% were involuntary culls. The two main causes were infertility (23.3%) and mastitis (18.6%), followed by lameness (9.1%), injuries (3.5%), respiratory disease (2.4%), metritis (2.2%), displaced abomasum (2%), and other (12.1%). Of those involuntary culls, 6.2% died on-farm.

Lunak says the more a dairy can shift its culling from involuntary to voluntary, the more likely it is to be successful.

"Culling cows from the bottom of the herd makes room for more profitable cows," he says. "A high percentage of voluntarily culled cows is required to maximize profits."

Conversely, if a dairy is losing too many cows to involuntary culling, it will be forced to hang onto cows that would preferably be culled. Those kickers and low producers have to stay to maintain herd size.

Quite often, culling due to heath occurs early in lactation. More than half of the culls due to death in the USDA/NAHMS report occurred at less than 50 days in milk. Lunak says, unfortunately, cows culled earlier in lactation (60 days in milk or less) also represent the greatest economic losses.

The loss of young cows due to involuntary culling also weighs on dairies economically. Lunak says it takes more than three lactations to recuperate the cost of raising a replacement heifer (about $2,000 per head), but the average productive life of a dairy cow is currently about 2.7 lactations. USDA data indicates

70% of cows are culled within their first three lactations. It's a break-even proposition at best.

If a dairy can manage its way out of involuntary culling and shift to voluntary culling (or simply less culling overall, depending on the dairy's goals), that is where the magic can happen.

Voluntary culling can remove low producers and replace them with healthy, genetically superior heifers. Lunak cautions that herds with a high percentage of first-lactation heifers (40% or more) might sacrifice short-term milk yield because heifers typically produce less than older-parity herd mates.

By lowering the involuntary cull rate, fewer replacement heifers are needed by the dairy to maintain its size. This provides the dairy with a number of flexible options, including:

- **Growing its herd size**
- **Selling excess replacement heifers, which currently are in high demand and fetching healthy prices**
- **Creating more beef-cross calves, which also are highly profitable in today's marketplace.**

In addition, healthier cows incur lower disease treatment costs and produce more milk. Lunak says much progress can be made if a herd focuses on the causes of involuntary culling — particularly transition health, reproduction and mastitis. These and other culling factors can be recorded with herd management software and tracked for progress over time.

"Evaluating the reasons that cows are leaving the herd can help to target the management areas that need improvement," he says.

By Maureen Hanson

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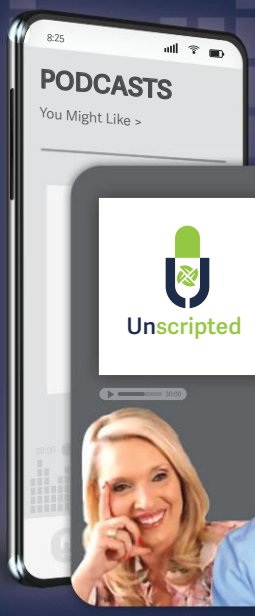
Look to Farm Journal's lineup of podcasts featuring these industry experts to keep you up to date on all things in agriculture. Tune in wherever you find your podcasts.



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Grow Getters explores agriculture's most inventive side hustles. Hosted by Davis Michaelsen, "Grow Getters" takes a lively look at creative ways farmers are plugging into their passions and exploring new technologies to add revenue to their operations.

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FARM JOURNAL

Global Rank of Diseases

Annual loss in U.S. dollars:

1. **Subclinical ketosis**
   $18 billion
2. **Clinical mastitis**
   $13 billion
3. **Subclinical mastitis**
   $9 billion
4. **Lameness**
   $6 billion
5. **Metritis**
   $5 billion
6. **Ovarian cysts**
   $4 billion
7. **Paratuberculosis/ Johne's disease**
   $4 billion
8. **Retained placenta**
   $3 billion
9. **Displaced abomasum**
   $0.6 billion
10. **Dystocia**
    $0.6 billion
11. **Milk fever/hypocalcemia**
    $0.6 billion
12. **Clinical ketosis**
    $0.2 billion

The Cost of the World's Top-12 Dairy Diseases

The economic impact across the globe

What is the world's most expensive dairy disease, and what countries are hit hardest by these costs?

Philip Rasmussen, researcher from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, recently explored these questions in a study soon-to-be published in the Journal of Dairy Science.

The 12 diseases were predetermined by the researchers. The factors used to estimate financial loss from each disease were milk production, fertility and culling. The financial estimations did not include treatment costs.

Loss due to reduced milk production was valued using a standard price of milk. Fertility losses were based on increased calving interval, which was measured using the number of days calving was delayed, daily milk production, and the price of milk. Culling costs were estimated using the increased risk of premature culling, based on the price of replacement cows and heifers, minus the sale price of cull cows.

An important consideration in the financial estimates was the fact that, in many cases, cows can suffer from more than one disease at the same time. To avoid double-counting the total cost of disease due to these comorbidities, the researchers adjusted the data using the statistical associations between diseases. Without this measure, they estimate the mean aggregate global losses would have been overestimated by 45%.

There were wide-ranging differences between disease effects in various regions of the world. For example, subclinical ketosis accounted for about 35% of the losses in Oceana, but only 24% of the losses in Europe. Conversely, 25% of Europe's losses were due to clinical mastitis, which contributed only 10% to Oceana's losses.

IMPACTS ACROSS THE GLOBE

Across the 183 countries modeled, the average comorbidity-adjusted total annual loss was about $351 per cow. By country, this amount ranged from just $72 per cow in Nigeria, to as high as $1,900 per cow in South Korea. Measured against human population, the countries most affected by dairy disease were New Zealand ($220 per person per year), Ireland ($140 per person per year) and Denmark ($70 per person per year).

The countries with the greatest annual losses overall were India ($12 billion), the U.S. ($8 billion), and China ($5 billion).

The authors say addressing dairy diseases and improving animal health would help improve the global efficiency of dairy production while lessening its environmental toll. They note the importance of milk and dairy products as nutrient-rich foods that will play a key role in global nutrition and food security, with total global food demand expected to increase by up to 56% between 2010 and 2050.

By Maureen Hanson

2025 Innovative Dairy Farmer of the Year Award

The International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA) is seeking nominations for the 2025 Innovative Dairy Farmer of the Year Award. Past recipients of this award can be described as clever, creative and leading edge.

The 27th annual Innovative Dairy Farmer of the Year award is co-sponsored by IDFA and Dairy Herd Management magazine. IDFA and Dairy Herd Management seek nominations of active U.S. dairy farms that have embraced innovation and technology, as well as industry collaboration and partnerships, to achieve greater productivity and growth.

Nominees will be judged on current methods as well as their positioning to meet future economic and business challenges. The winning operation will be highlighted in the January 2025 issue of Dairy Herd Management magazine and recognized during Dairy Forum 2025 in San Antonio, Texas.

Those nominating farms and/or operations must describe:

- Use of technology or partnerships to enhance farm efficiency, sustainability and growth opportunities for the farm.
- Preparedness to meet future economic and business challenges.
- Distinctive practices that set the operation apart from peers.
- Community involvement.
- Any other acknowledgments or achievements the judges should consider.

Nomination deadline: Oct. 25, 2024 | **Scan for nomination form and more info:**

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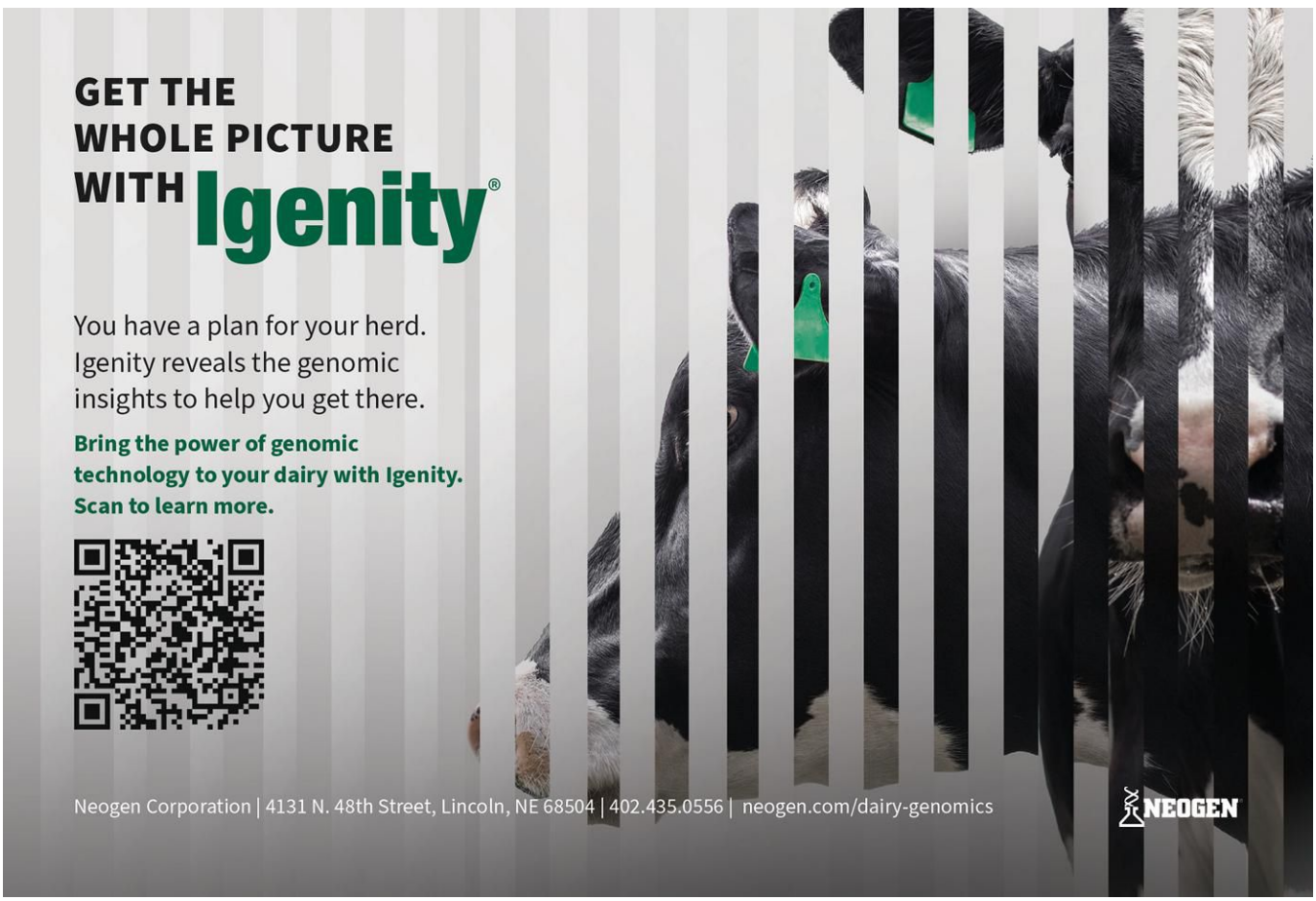

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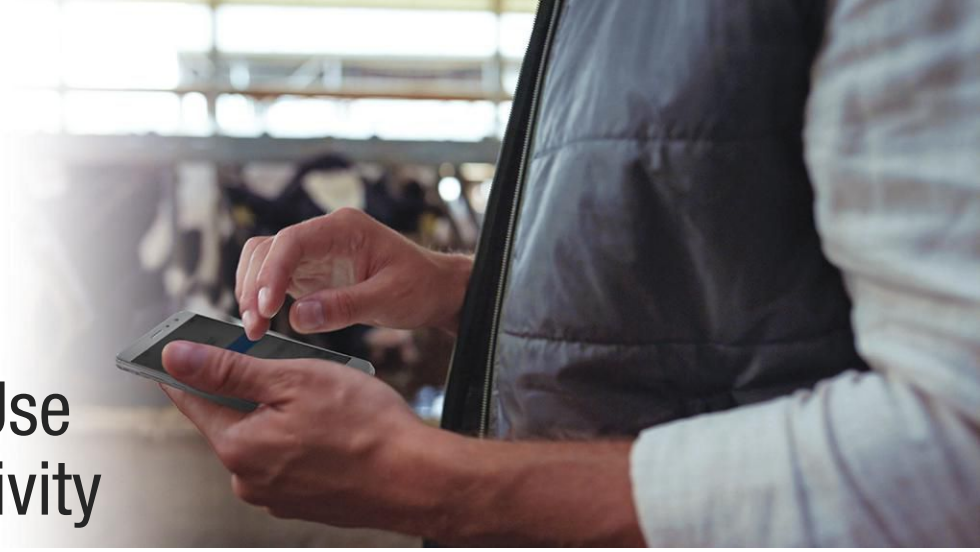

Balancing Cell Phone Use and Productivity

Managing personal mobile technology and work

Cell phones are an integral part of modern life, but their presence in workplaces draws a gray line, as increasingly more employees are on their cell phones during times they should be focused on work. Many dairies, like businesses in other industries, have strict phone policies stating, 'No personal use of cell phones during working hours except for emergencies.' Yet, enforcing these policies can vary widely, as evidenced at Rosy-Lane Holsteins in Wisconsin.

THE REALITY OF PHONE POLICIES IN THE WORKPLACE

Jordan Matthews, one of the owners of Rosy-Lane Holsteins in Watertown, Wis., acknowledges that his team sometimes struggles with strictly enforcing their phone policy.

"Nearly all of our team members have families, including young children, and I would not want something to happen at home and them miss a call," Matthews says.

Many of his team members are the primary drivers in their families, with significant others at home taking care of children. Being a new father himself, Matthews deeply understands the importance of being available for family emergencies.

SAFETY FIRST

At Rosy-Lane Holsteins, a results-oriented coaching method is employed. As Matthews explains, "If team members are hitting goals and perhaps are on their cell phone when time allows, it's hard to knock them."

While the farm's policy is lenient in certain respects, it prioritizes safety above all else. For instance, phone use is strictly prohibited while driving or operating machinery unless it is hands-free.

"We do not allow phones while driving; it needs to be hands-free, whether in a skid loader, truck or tractor, for safety," he says.

Many team members wear an earbud in one ear to talk on the phone or listen to music while working. Having an earbud in one ear is permitted, but not in both ears to ensure safety measures are maintained.

> "If team members are hitting goals and perhaps are on their cell phones when time allows, it's hard to knock them." —*Jordan Matthews*

Robert Hagevoort, professor and Extension dairy specialist for New Mexico State University, concurs with this approach, emphasizing that the golden rule has always been no phone use when on the move.

"I do know that several of the large farms in our area have cracked down on the use of earbuds for safety reasons, because you can't hear the cows, equipment and traffic," he notes.

TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY

Rosy-Lane Holsteins demonstrates a balanced phone policy isn't about strict enforcement; it's about fostering a culture of trust. By prioritizing safety and recognizing the personal needs of employees, businesses can allow flexibility without compromising productivity and safety. Hagevoort agrees, adding that engaged employees tend to leave their phones in their back pockets.

"It's all about culture," he says.

By nurturing a culture of trust and responsibility, workplaces such as Rosy-Lane Holsteins set an example of how to balance the inevitable presence of mobile technology alongside the timeless values of safety and productivity.

By Karen Bohnert

PHOTO: ISTOCK

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ABOUT THE FARM

Y Run Farms is a third-generation dairy operation located in Troy, Pa. Today, they milk 1,200 cows and farm more than 2,700 acres. The farm is run by Glenn and Laurie Kline, in partnership with their sons, Chad and Travis, as well as 20 full-time employees.
—Karen Bohnert

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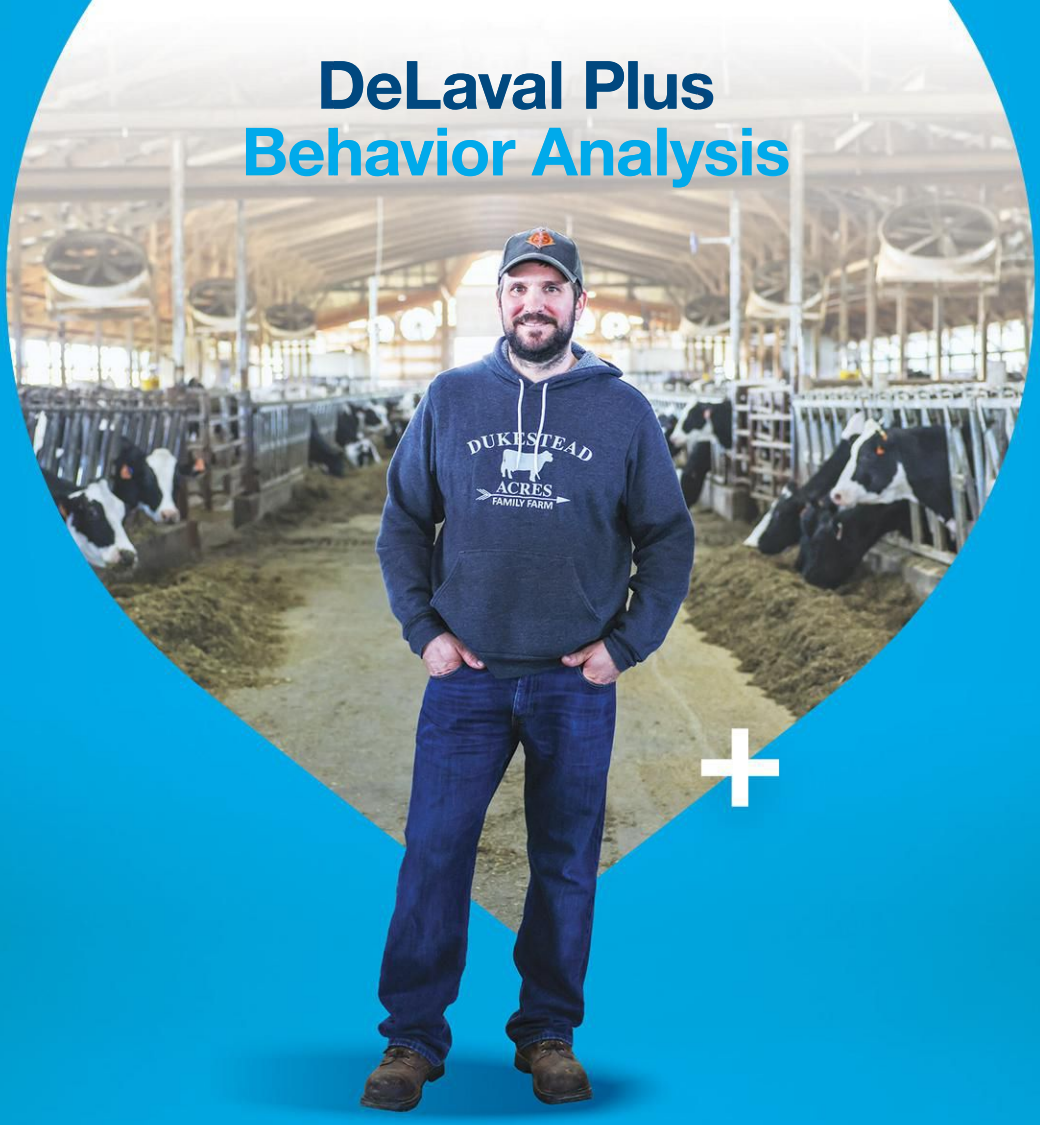

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